

Svend Erik Larsen*

Narratives as cultural embedment

<https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2022-2073>

Abstract: All cultures produce stories; all humans are storytellers. Hence, by implication, narratives must serve a fundamental cultural and existential function in human life. This article suggests the term “cultural embedment” to characterize this function. This article points out that, for narratives to play the role as a tool for cultural embedment, the double structure of narratives always switches back and forth between an object level and a meta level. To capture this reduplication as a contextualized and historical dynamics, Clifford Geertz’s term “thick description” is introduced together with Jurij Lotman’s conception of culture as an interconnected primary and a secondary modeling system. After a short outline of six important approaches to narratives that have to be taken into account, the article proposes a thick description that characterizes narratives as tools for cultural embedment. A final analytical sketch of Chigozie Obioma’s novel *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) briefly demonstrates a non-formalistic approach to narratives as tools for cultural embedment in a dynamic interchange between several levels.

Keywords: agency; Chigozie Obioma; Jurij Lotman; modeling system; thick description

1 Introduction: embedment

All cultures have languages. All languages produce narratives. Familiarizing oneself with a culture’s narratives may not represent a sufficient precondition for learning to live in or at least to know a culture, but it is a necessary one. These three interconnected statements are as true as they are self-evident. But even if they sound simple and straightforward, it is equally true that they are so charged with complexities that it is hard to achieve a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary agreement on what a culture is, what language is, what a narrative is, and what belonging to and knowing a culture means. Experts on narratology disagree, cultural studies experts have their controversies, and linguists are at loggerheads about the identity and workings of language. To make matters more convoluted, we could add literary scholars, historians, and media and film experts to the group

*Corresponding author: Svend Erik Larsen, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark,
E-mail: litsel@cc.au.dk

of experts, and the panoramic bird's eye view would become even more unattainable. To rub salt in the wound, one could also introduce the long and winding historical development of narrative forms, narrative norms, and narrative theories within and between cultures to finally recognize that a unanimous conclusion on the identity of language, culture, and narrative has never been within reach.

However, there is no need to give up and desperately bury one's face in one's hands. There is an important and inspiring lesson to be learned from these complications. Investigating the nature and power of narrative is and has always been, a project that may begin with a clear-cut statement and, yet, will always end with a complex and tentative conclusion which first and foremost opens the door to further explorations. This is so because an investigation of this kind is at the same time an investigation of the cultures and languages to which the narratives belong, and which are developed and transformed by the same narratives. Narratives are a moving target which is kept in constant movement by those who engage in narrative practices – writers and storytellers, members of reading, watching, and listening audiences, as well as investigators and theoreticians. We are all always embedded in narratives – from sophisticated artists or researchers to kids returning from school and telling their parents what happened there or talking about the latest pic on their digital device – and, in turn, narratives embed us in our cultural and historical environment. They constitute ongoing cultural sign production not only as the stories we tell in various media, but also as the theories and analyses we produce to understand them. This meta level is also an integral part of the sign processes themselves, which generate the theoretical questions and ideas that foster the theories and guide the analyses. The theories are as historical as the narratives they construct as their objects, and this meta level is itself turned into a narrative which is told in the histories of poetics and narrative theory. The effect of this dual dynamics I will call *embedment*: On any level of discourse, narratives function as a mechanism of cultural integration of human subjects, which allows them to position themselves as agents in a cultural environment and, simultaneously and self-reflexively, ask questions about the conditions and effects of their agency and positioning.

2 Participation and modeling

Before I suggest a definition of narrative that opens for a study of narratives as cultural embedment processes, I will introduce two useful theoretical positions, exemplified by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the semiotician Jurij Lotman. In his *The interpretation of cultures* (1973), Geertz attempts to understand the particularity of knowledge obtained in the condition of participant observation.

This approach to theoretically based knowledge is the only relevant one in situations in which the object under scrutiny is a social action or process that requires the presence of the observer or researcher in the action itself. Geertz's object is a traditional Balinese cockfight, comprising the totality of the actual events, including tools and other concrete details of the social action in question, of the history of the event, of the values involved in it, and, finally, of the actual engagement of the local participating subjects. In this case, Geertz participates as an onlooker among the local people, but still as a foreigner. His task as a researcher is known to them with the implication that his presence may interfere with the usual unfolding of the cockfight. In other words, on the level of the object, he is an outside observer who needs to have a meta level recognition of the limits and conditions of his presence for the final research output (Geertz 1973: 412–53).

Geertz comes up with two solutions to the complications triggered by his entanglement in both science and social life: one is narrative, the other conceptual. (1) He produces a narrative about the whole situation to clarify his cultural embedment in the position of an observing visitor to the readers – and, not least, to himself. The narrative is both about the event and about his self-reflection on his own agency as a participant observer. In other words, from the point of view of the process of cultural embedment, the narrative embraces at the same time the object level, which is very much like what the locals would tell him about the cockfight, and the meta level, which only expresses Geertz's own process of scholarly recognition. (2) In this way, narrative can be seen as an opening of the object level toward the meta level and its methodological and theoretical questioning. Here, Geertz suggests a term to contain the double structure of the narrative. He calls it a “thick description.” The kind of definition of an object in which the observer is embedded as a particular participant has to take into account the complete set of contexts of the cockfight: the larger Balinese history of cockfighting and its rituals, symbols, and cultural meanings; the unfolding of the actual event and the subjective dimensions involved in it; the conditions for his own observations; and thus the limits and the validity of the knowledge he produces.

In contrast to a decontextualized and universal definition of, say, the law of gravity, the contextualized and historically sensitive thick description will have to change when the object and its contexts changes, including the context of observation and the knowledge Geertz produces. Hence, in this case the meta level – the concept of “thick description” – facilitates an approach to the object level of concrete narratives as a historical and thus changeable social reality. Narratives also belong to the same kind of objects as a social event like the cockfight and can only be approached by thick descriptions that include its contexts – the context of the culturally specific tradition of narratives, the context of its occurrence, and the cultural embedment of the analyst in that tradition. No matter

the universality and formality of the concepts I may introduce, my own approach to narratives depends on my embedment in a Western narrative tradition in all its complex multiplicity. If a formal definition sets object level and meta level apart from each other as independent entities, a thick description instead assumes they interact in a dynamic relation of mutual change, simply because we cannot avoid participating in at least one of the two levels built into the narratives we approach.

The other theoretical position has a more pronounced generality. It is Jurij Lotman's analysis of culture based on the concept of "model." In his *Universe of the mind* (1990; see also Lotman and Uspensky 1978), he analyzes culture as a self-reflexive mechanism consisting of two levels. This is where the notion of model becomes relevant (see Johansen and Larsen 2002: ch. 7). Since the model implies that something is modeled by it, the notion first of all implies a hierarchy of at least two levels. Cultural invariants are then, in Lotman's view, stable elements selected by the model and thus elements that remain constant when moving from one level to another, from model to modeled and vice versa. Second, the concept of model implies a code that processes, duplicates, or replaces the object with a model, a processual code that maintains a partial yet incomplete similarity between model and object. Such a model is for Lotman a text, thus a semiotic complex of signs which by being signs refers to something else and does so with verbal language at its center. Hence, models refer to something else, namely other texts, while at the same time containing the codes rooted in language that allow for this reference. Any text in a culture may then serve as a model in some contexts and, in other contexts, be referred to as an object modeled by another text which then is the model. Geertz takes the cockfight to be a model of Balinese culture; yet for the locals, it is an object shaped by their actions and communication during the event. A model is thus first of all a textual function, not a text belonging to a specific category of texts.

However, the opposition between model and modeled as two fixed categories is static and cannot stand alone in a proper semiotic understanding of culture. For Lotman, the pertinent opposition is rather that between, on the one hand, primary modeling systems – which will be one textual function of the narrative that refers to the cockfight through certain selected features – and, on the other hand, secondary modeling systems – the scientific reflection on the details selected from the cockfight and retained in the narrative, now reconstructed as a thick description of Balinese culture with regard to values, gender roles, social relations, etc. However, Geertz's reconstruction can also be seen as a primary modeling system by being a reference to a certain way of doing anthropology and then to be discussed in a secondary modeling system in theoretical discourses on the production of scientific knowledge on the

condition of participant observation. Similarly, his own narrative may serve as a secondary modeling system by selecting features of the cockfight and its contexts which are more or less alien to the people who actually take part in it and relate their past experiences of previous cockfights. After all, Geertz participates by interpreting the cockfight and its cultural ramifications rather than participating in the goings-on themselves. In other words, models are functional textual processes with an inbuilt double function as both object level and meta level, and with a code that allows for the switch between the functional levels and thus opens for a dynamic embedment of human subjects in a culture as agents on different levels.

When Lotman calls culture a “collective non-hereditary memory” (Lotman 1990: xi), he implicitly claims that cultures are acquired by learning or rather by formation, hence the importance of language and communication as the core of modeling. Memory is not taken in the sense of neurological equipment pertaining to the human species, but as actual memorial features accumulated and thus changed by the acquired codes that inform the switch between primary and secondary modeling functions. These codes are the narratives conceived as cultural mechanisms of embedment that ensure that cultures unfold in an ongoing modeling and re-modeling in a self-reflexive and thus context-sensitive and dynamic process. Hence, the cockfight as primary modeling of the social relations also has a self-reflexiveness for the local participants when they evaluate today’s events and its combating cocks. Here, the evaluated event acts as a secondary modeling system based on memories of earlier events and the stories about them, epitomized in narrated myths of iconic cockfights from times beyond living memory, learned and kept alive through ongoing storytelling (to which may now be added the stories of foreign visitors like Geertz).¹

For Geertz the thick description of the cockfight through his narrative about his participant observations is a tool for *his* cultural embedment as well as for the local agents in *their* stories, but different kinds of embedment; for Lotman, mostly implicitly, the codes that allow for the shifting back and forth between positions of primary and secondary modeling systems as textual functions are the narratives that makes the shifting positioning the core of cultural dynamics. The application of the narrative codes works as the active embedment of the cultural agents who apply the codes – the narrative of earlier cockfights as an evaluation of the current one on the one hand and the narrative concatenation of selected details *in situ* that activates the old stories on the other.

1 On collective memory as communication and narrative, see, for example, Assmann 2011; Conner 1989; Halbwachs 1950.

3 Notions of narrative

Before I produce a thick description to suggest a notion of narrative as a tool for cultural embedment in a dynamic interrelation between object level and meta level, I briefly relate to a few existing positions in narrative studies with a focus partly different from mine (for overviews see Phelan and Rabinowitz 2008). Yet, they indicate the dimensions that still have to be integrated in the thick description I am going to offer.

- 1) *Action*: Since Aristotle's *Poetics* (4th century BCE), action has been placed at the center of narrative theory. Narratives represent human action as it unfolds, with a beginning, a middle, and an end in a successful or failed quest for an object. The focus was placed on the acting human subject and the end was supposed to be the necessary consequence of these actions in accordance with the universal laws of a universe governed by divinities (Aristotle 2001). Although conceived in relation to drama, the human quest for an object that fuels the action has been the pivotal point in the majority of later narrative theories, including structuralist semiotics, also when the divine laws silently controlling human action were transformed into social, biological, and cultural constraints.
- 2) *Focalization*: Inspired in the early twentieth century by the new media of film, literary scholars developed analytical tools to ponder on *how* narratives are told and *how* the represented world is observed, rather than *what* they tell, which Aristotle and his many followers took as their priority. The multiplicity of narrators, of point of view, or of focalization enters narrative studies as it did for example in Gérard Genette's *Discours du récit* (1972) or Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (1985), closely related to structuralism, formalism, and semiotics.
- 3) *Media*: In an interview in 1966, the French film director Jean-Luc Godard gave the following response to the question on whether he believed narratives should have a beginning, a middle, and an end: "Yes, but not necessarily in that order" (Tynan 1966). This response dissolves the standard sequential action as the primary driver of narratives, implicitly or explicitly based on linear temporality and prospective motivation and intentionality. With this tongue-in-cheek response, Godard also questions the fundamental role of verbal narratives as the ideal form of narrative, based on the assumption that language, in the manner of the ideal model of the Aristotelian narrative, unfolds in time with the utterer as the responsible human agent expressing his or her motives, intentions, and desires in a quest for meaning. Godard's short rejoinder points out that other media, like film, are free to create alternative kinds of narratives and narrative order to verbal storytelling, also in crossovers between media (see Bell and Ryan 2019). In 1966, Roland Barthes proposed two notions for

narratives integrating several media. He discussed cartoons and advertisements as mixed media products based on two principles: *delay*, in which language is necessary for the concatenation of visual frames in a graphic novel or a cartoon in a sequential order which the static visual media cannot bring about by itself; and *anchorage*, in which the addition of an explicatory text to an image provides it with more precise meaning than the picture in itself can generate (Barthes 1966; for a broader application, see Larsen 2011).

- 4) *Reception*: From the represented action, the strategy of representation and the media of representation as keys to get a grip on the nature of narratives, the focus on reception adds the receiver to the picture, whether a reader or an onlooker. Wolfgang Iser points out that all narratives have gaps or indeterminacies that will have to be filled out by the recipient in order for the narratives to get some kind of logic and cohesion. In other words, the receiver is an active player on a par with the writer in shaping a narrative as a meaningful totality, bridging its internal contradictions, jumps, and enigmatic details (Iser 1971).
- 5) *Cognition*: In an attempt to see narrative as a cognitive process for both artist and recipient, in *Toward a "natural" narratology* (1997; see also Fludernik 2003, 2010), Monica Fludernik emphasizes narrativity over narrative. Narrativity, according to Fludernik, is the activation of the human capacity to shape experience in the form of narratives which is inherent in the human cognitive apparatus; inadvertently we mobilize narrativity as a cognitive schema to grasp the world, an evocation of experience shaped as narratives (which she calls experientiality). Rather than representing human actions and our environments, narratives are a way of setting off this schematic cognitive make-up. In the same vein, Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et récit* (1983–1985) takes narratives as interpretative tools that help us grasp temporality as an existential condition of human life, while Donald Polkinghorne's *Narrative knowing and the human sciences* (1988) points to so-called life stories, memoirs, and testimonies as existential narrative tools serving to bring some order to an otherwise alienating and troublesome flow of human experiences.
- 6) *Ontology*: Aristotle made a distinction between historical narratives about what actually happened and poetical narratives that render what may happen. However, both kinds of narratives are for Aristotle rooted in reality: the actual events and the potential events are both part of reality within the same ontological horizon. It is for later theories to make a categorical ontological distinction between fiction and reality. According to theorists like Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) and Lubomir Doležel (2010), narratives construct a reality as a possible world, existing on conditions different from the world of human experience, even if the possible world and the real world show similarities. On the other hand, being a product of human imagination and semiotic capacities,

possible worlds formed as narratives are products of human creation and thus embedded in the world of human experience. The ontological difference between fiction and reality indicates a difference that only exists within human reality, parallel to the distinction between object level and meta level, primary modeling and secondary modeling systems. Hence, narratives as scenarios of possible worlds raise questions of the limits of human reality and the possibility of moving its boundaries through human agency shaped through narratives.

The shared center of the six positions is the shaping of human agency embedded in the human life world as mediated through narratives switching between object level and meta level:

- A. *Object level agency*: Humans are (1) agents of social action; (2) focalizing observers selecting among the infinite amount of possible details that frames the actions; (3) mediators that reshapes the logic of actions through the choice of media as tools of narrative action.
- B. *Meta level agency*: Humans are (4) constructive agents by being recipients of narratives as incomplete models of the world; (5) cognitive agents modeling the world of experience through immanent schemata; (6) self-reflexive agents defining the boundaries of human reality.

What seems to me to be lacking in the list is the historicity of embedment and its cultural context, which for me is the core of narrative: it thrives on and also drives the historicity of human existence rather than the sheer temporality which is the heart of the matter for Ricoeur. These observations lead me to a thick description rather than a formal definition of a narrative: A narrative is a cultural mechanism of embedment through sign production with a permanent double function of being a reference to and a meta-reflection on the status of the world referred to in which the embedment takes place. With different emphasis depending on cultural context, a narrative contains all six dimensions briefly characterized above.

A narrative is a tool for cultural embedment. When activated by the cultural agents it situates humans in time and space in relation to each other and to their natural and social environment as an ongoing attempt to construct an imagined cohesion in past, present and future which is based on selected facts and conditioned by language and other signs.

4 An analytical sketch

The two important words in the thick description above are “ongoing attempt.” The narrative tool is no guarantee for a successful embedment, and no embedment

lasts forever but is constantly challenged by the historical changes of the cultural context, at times instigated by the narratives. With a brief analysis of Chigozie Obioma's Booker Prize winning novel for 2019, *An Orchestra of Minorities*, I will illustrate how a focus on this narrative as an exercise in a continuous and perilous cultural embedment through human agency may activate my thick description of narrative, not as a model to be applied as in formalist semiotics, but as a tool to discuss cultural embedment through the novel taking into account the six dimensions and their context-determined interrelations, making some of them more important than others. The novel's narrative structures and strategies work with embedment into different and opposing cultures and into different ontologies on the levels of characters, readers, and the writer or rather, to use Wayne C. Booth's now classical term, implied author.

The novel may be analyzed in Aristotelian terms with a beginning, a middle, and an end, even in that order, focusing on the actions of the two protagonists pursuing a common goal: to realize their love against the impediments created by their social and culture contexts. In this sense, it is a romance about the turbulent love affair between two young Nigerian Igbos from different classes, the chicken farmer Chinonso and Ndali from a rich and corrupt local family but educated in pharmacology in England. She is fluent in English against the background of her half-forgotten Igbo; he is equipped with poor English but a fluent native Igbo and no education apart from the poultry farming that his father taught him. To impress her family, he wants to pursue the "education of the White Man's civilization" in Europe (Obioma 2019: 153), but fails completely and returns empty-handed, while she marries according to her status and opens a pharmacy. The characters are trapped by a split between local traditions and Western modernization, which both shapes the larger and partly implicit context of their lives and is internalized by the characters themselves and thus central also to their insufficient self-reflection and incoherent actions. From a traditional more-or-less structuralist perspective, a narratological analysis would be able to grasp this dimension of the novel – the narrated events that focus on the failed human agency of the two protagonists in their attempt through their life-stories, or rather in opposition to them, to be embedded in this fundamentally divided cultural context in a quest for happiness together. At the end Chinonso, involuntarily causes Ndali's death when he sets fire to her pharmacy without knowing she is caught inside.

However, there is a meta level built on top of the ongoing series of events on the elementary level of the represented action. The components of that level are but the scaffolding of the novel's narrative progression. Its defining feature is the enunciative structure, in which everything is observed and told by Chinonso's protective spirit, his *chi*, and passes through the filter of traditional Igbo cosmology. Thus, the cosmology serves as a secondary modeling system in Igbo culture

and as a meta level in the novel, but also, with the *chi* as narrator and the dominant point of view, it becomes an integral part of the way the narrative is told. The non-Igbo and the forgetful modern Igbo reader are much helped by a map of the Igbo cosmos on the pages just before the first chapter of the book. The *chi* helps Chinonso through life and is given this task by the superior divine creator Chukwu, but only after it has left the function as protector of other now deceased persons. The various acts and experiences of its many past hosts are used by the *chi* as illustrative comparisons to the flagrant stupidity of Chinonso, absorbed as he is by his passion and bad plans. The supreme spiritual being has an infinite number of alternative names, some of which are used in turn as an address on almost every page of the book. The readers are both us, the humans who read the *chi*'s story about Chinonso's erratic life, and Chukwu, who gets a report of what happens in his world.

If this sounds like another deterministic and teleological universe in line with an Aristotelian or a Christian cosmos, it would be a wrong conclusion. Chukwu only has to be updated now and then by selective reports from the many *chis* (and other spirits): "You [Chukwu] know that if we were to collect everything our hosts do in one testimony, it would never end. Hence, a testifier must be selective and render to you that which is relevant" (p. 240). More importantly, a *chi* has a limited horizon. One of the reasons is this: "A *chi* cannot influence a host who is not in a conscious state" (p. 109), which is also the reason why it prefers to turn a half blind eye to his sex life, and why a sleeping host is beyond its influence. The *chi* may produce a dream and see what it may lead to, but otherwise it has to wait for the host to wake up. Another shortcoming is that the *chi* at times has fun with its colleagues, the other *chis*, while forgetting to keep track of its host and then has to apologize to Chukwu under one of his many alternative names: "Because of this distraction, I was unable to bear witness to everything my host did at the market, and for this I plead your forgiveness, Obisidinelu" (p. 100). Also, the *chi* cannot look into the future (p. 222), so its guidance of the host is at times as disastrous as the host's own decisions.

The basic logic of the Igbo cosmos is precisely to set people free to engage in life according to their own passion and volition, pay the price, and recognize that the world is beyond their understanding with a creator who only offers some spiritual support through the *chi*, but otherwise does not demonstrate any great interest in his creation. The cosmology designs a pragmatic engagement in an uncertain material world, guided by the *chi* and supported by the ancestors who represent collective traditions that might help the vulnerable individual to find his or her way, but improvisation still remains the best way to survive. Hence, in contrast to Western secularization, gradual progress through willful and rational change – the root of classical narratives and narratology – plays no fundamental individual or collective role. There is lot of humor, hope, and horror in this cosmology, but it is

concentrated on the humans' own inventive struggle with life and for life (on African cosmology, see Menkiti 2004; Onwuanibe 1984; Wiredu 1984).

In other words, the meta level that encapsulates the confused position of the implied author as a fragmented cosmological value system also produces more gaps and indeterminacies than explanations for the readers. Whether the readers originate in an Igbo culture, a Western culture, or any other culture, the reference to cultural context is a conundrum that must be solved by the readers themselves. The cosmology does not deliver a dogmatic stock of answers. Hence, if the novel as a narrative whole is about the failed embedment of the characters in a split cultural context, the meta level forces the readers to also participate in this embedment, having themselves a split culture as their life condition as does everybody else in a globalized world.

Blinded by his ambition to get Ndali by making an impression on her family from the local corrupt elite with his plans to obtain a degree from somewhere in Europe, Chinonso bumps into the effect of this globalized cultural fragmentation that plays a part in creating the contradictions in his own cultural context. This happens via the Internet. One of his old mates, Jamike, is part of a group of "stupid Yahoo boys" (p. 324), professional cybercriminals based in some Internet café, and Chinonso is the easy victim of their online transactions through a seductive rhetoric, as full of gaps as the accounts of the *chi*, yet different ones. Together with Ghana, Nigeria is one of the main locations for the so-called 419 scam, named after a paragraph in the Nigerian penal code directed against local advance-payment fraud already in existence before the Internet, but now set in motion with an exponentially enhanced efficiency (Tive 2006). A "419" is an email from a fake sender inviting the receiver, who may live anywhere in the world, to make a considerable pre-payment for a fake service described as a particularly advantageous offer, one typically connected with a luring appeal to individual greed.

In Chinonso's case, the bait is a promise to set up his education at some Cypriotic college. He sells all his property and transfers the money to his friend, who promises that travel, fees, and accommodation will be arranged before he arrives. Upon his arrival in Cyprus, Chinonso finds out that the friend's email and phone number do not exist. After having battled with Western bureaucracy, Muslim norms, the Turkish language, and being imprisoned for a crime of passion, he returns to Nigeria only to find out that Ndali has married in the meantime and now runs her own pharmacy, to which he eventually sets fire.

What dies in the bonfire is all hope of cultural embedment for the characters, based as it is on misguided narratives in three dimensions. First, there is the latent narrative of unbridgeable conflicts in a postcolonial and globalized cultural context with a long pre-history; then, there is the narrative of the illusions of the two protagonists, created and nurtured by themselves as a narrative vision of their future; finally, there is the narrative created by the Internet fraudsters who, by conjuring up the false hope for a successful embedment for Chinonso here and now,

turn the narrative into a tool for their own embedment as rich undercover criminals. Narratives as tools to foster cultural embedment are all about ongoing attempts.

5 Narrative embedment at its limits

The introduction of the global media world toward the end of Obioma's novel introduces a new cultural context based on invented realities, which some may call a perverted version of the decontextualized and ahistorical construction of possible worlds, while others may call it a historical and cultural embedment of human agents through the narratives about money, success, and greed that digital media circulate in the manner of fake news. The Western secular cosmology of individual action and success, the Igbo cosmology of universal uncertainty and improvisation, and the globalized virtual space all give directions to human agency, yet not the same, although they co-exist in the same cultural space in mutual conflict. Through an activation of all six dimensions of narrative embedment – action, focalization, media; reception, cognition, ontology – the narrative shows the power and the limits of narratives in the necessary process of cultural embedment without which no humans can live. The final act of arson that kills Ndali in her pharmacy is the destruction of the reliability of voluntary human action, the alienation from any overall cosmology, and the mistrust in human interaction in globalized communicative conditions; yet, the fire also marks, from the positive side, that an insistence on human agency as improvisation and experiment, even when it fails, will have to frame the narratives we need in the 21st century to help us respond to the unsettling question: What is the role and condition of human agency in a globalized cultural context?

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Bionote

Svend Erik Larsen

Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

litsel@cc.au.dk

Svend Erik Larsen (b. 1946), dr. phil., is Professor Emeritus, Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, Denmark, as well as Honorary Professor, University College London, and Yangtze River Professor, Sichuan University. He is co-editor of *Orbis Litterarum* and a board member of EuroScience. Past roles include Vice-President of Academia Europaea and General Treasurer of the International Comparative Literature Association. He has authored/co-authored 10 books and 400+ articles and has edited/co-edited 18 volumes (see also: <http://au.dk/en/litsel@cc.au.dk>).